

The ramifications of COVID-19 on an education system that was already broken.

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown South Africa's schooling system into further disarray, demonstrating how the country's education system, defined by the apartheid regime's legacy, lacks resilience in the face of disruption. Research, compiled by [Amnesty International](#), shows that many communities continue to live with the consequences of political and economic decisions made during apartheid times, where schools that serve historically white communities are better resourced than those that serve historically black communities. There is no doubt that the South African education system is plagued by inefficiency such as mud schools, pit latrines and lack of resources, which perpetuates inequality and leads to a large number of students falling between the cracks and being failed by the very institutions that are supposed to open up opportunities.

In 2017, the [OECD Benchmarking report](#) assessed the quality of education globally with South Africa ranking 75th out of 76 countries. Finland was ranked first, with Japan coming in second, South Korea third, and Denmark fourth. There are many contributing factors to this and [Spaull](#) & [The Centre for Education Policy Development](#) identified these factors as:

- children who leave school unable to read, write, or do arithmetic
- teachers who lack the required abilities and knowledge to teach children the required skills,
- the short supply of teachers, and,
- low teacher performance.

These factors are exacerbated by lack of resources which exacerbates poor student performance.

Learning Losses

The COVID-19 pandemic stunned the world's education systems, limiting educational opportunities for many students at all levels and in most countries, particularly for poor students and those who are otherwise disenfranchised. In an article written by [UNICEF](#) on 22 July 2021, it was noted that the impact of disrupted schooling since the COVID-19 outbreak has been disastrous, with learners falling 75% to a full school year behind where they should be. School children have lost 54% of their learning time due to rotational attendance, intermittent school cancellations, and days off for specific grades.

Drop Out

According to the report released by [South Africa's National Income Dynamics Study- Coronavirus Rapid Mobile \(NIDS-CRAM\)](#) on 12 May 2021, 750,000 students dropped out of school during the COVID-19 epidemic, or three times the pre-pandemic average, an enormous increase from the pre-pandemic numbers of 230,000. These alarming statistics have been reported to have led to school attendance being at the lowest level it has ever been in 20 years. According to [Nompumelelo Mohohlwane](#) from the Department of Education, the interferences caused by the pandemic have played a huge role in children not returning to school. Mohohlwane stated that the provinces that were observed to have had the lowest return to schools were Eastern Cape (92%) and Free State (87%).

Schools utilised a rotational attendance system since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to minimise social contact and mitigate potential covid cases. The system seemed to work at the time owing to the predicament the globe was in, however, it was quickly understood that this was not optimal. Although rotational attendance was seen as a solution, it has a disadvantage in the missed number of schooling days. Prof. Sarah Howie, an education expert at Stellenbosch University, told [Xinhua](#) that rotational learning is harmful to children of all ages, particularly those in the foundation phase. This

was reinforced by Mohohlwane who stated that although this is an effort to combat learning losses across the continent and developing countries, we are not yet at a point where we can substitute in-person schooling with remote learning.

The current state of education in South Africa is characterised by regular disruptions, too little learning, and high levels of inequality in the education system. One of the most important factors influencing learner outcomes is children's socioeconomic status. While access to education may not be limited for every South African child, the quality of education is not certain, particularly for black children. According to an article on [the daily vox](#), in South Africa public schools in peri-urban and rural areas account for 75% of the schooling system. These schools predominantly serve impoverished black children, and they continue to be overcrowded, dysfunctional and insufficiently resourced. In a country where inequality is endemic and is heightened by various factors such as shortage of physical infrastructure, illegal pit latrines, no library facilities and shortage of teachers among many other factors, there is a need for a rapid response to the current statistics that we are seeing. The conditions cannot continue as is and, we cannot continue to blame the learning outcomes on the COVID-19 pandemic. The learning losses that were encountered in the past two years have been devastating; the first step to addressing this crisis being the recent return to fulltime school attendance, there is still a long way to go. It is important for the sector to ensure that appropriate remedial measures have been implemented to help children who have missed out and help them get back on track to counter long-term learning losses ([UNESCO](#)).

In response to the increasing number of school dropouts caused by the COVID-19 disruptions to education, together with the economic effects, there is a dire need for organisations, academics, stakeholders, the government, and indeed all role players in the education sector to come together to collaborate on an effective recovery plan for the schooling system, not only as a reaction to COVID-19, but to future proof the education system. With the resumption of fulltime school attendance, [collaboration](#) is an important tool for education interventions in the country to achieve educational change. The National Association of Social Change Entities in Education (NASCEE) is one such organisation whose aim is to help collaborative efforts and works towards maximising the contribution of NPOs towards the national development goals related to education. Although collaboration is not simple, when all actors are committed to singular purpose, they are more likely to overcome the gaps and meet students' needs.

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